Han Art and Material Culture

Slide 2:
During the two Han dynasties and the brief Wang Mang interregnum which separated them, art and material culture persisted with the use and refinement of existing techniques. In contrast to the Shang and Zhou periods, bronze – which we studied in subunit 1.2.5 – ceased to be used primarily for ritual vessels and became increasingly used for everyday items. Its use, however, was limited mainly to the wealthier members of society, as was the use of jade, lacquerware, and glazed ceramics. Most of the population used gray pottery, which was unglazed pottery often painted or decorated with images in relief.

Slide 3:
Left: A gilt bronze lamp with a shutter, in the shape of a maidservant, 2nd century BCE
Note the differences between the style of the lamp and the bronzes that you studied in subunit 1.2.5.
Right: Coins from the Wang Mang interregnum (9–23CE)

Slide 4:
The earliest ceramics from China date back to the Yangshao culture, centered in the Yellow River area, and provided evidence for some of the earliest civilizations in the region. By the time of the Han dynasty, ceramic production techniques had developed considerably, with widespread use of pottery wheels and glazes. The first porcelain is said to have been produced towards the end of the Eastern Han period, although it did not become widespread until several centuries later. Glazes, however, became increasingly sophisticated, and painting and relief art more elaborate.

Slide 9:
Figurines were also a popular art form during the Han dynasties.

Slide 10:
The figurines on the right once had wooden arms and miniature silk clothes, which have eroded over time and have since disappeared.

Slide 11:
Note the intricate detail on the candelabra.

Slide 12:
[Adapted from Boundless https://www.boundless.com/art-history/chinese-and-korean-art-before-1279/han-dynasty/philosophy-and-art/]
Funerary art developed rapidly during the Han dynasties. During the Western Han period, grave goods, i.e., items buried alongside the dead, were usually wares and pieces of art that were used by the tomb occupant when he or she was alive. During the Eastern Han period, new stylistic goods, wares, and artwork found in tombs were usually made exclusively for burial and were not produced for previous use by the
deceased when he or she was alive. For example, see the tomb statuette of the cavalryman and horse in slide 9. These wares include miniature ceramic towers – usually watchtowers and urban residential towers – which provide historians with clues about lost wooden architecture. In addition to towers, there are also miniature models of querns, water wells, pigsties, and farm fields with pottery pigs, dogs, sheep, chickens, and ducks.

“Inside tombs, the walls were often decorated in stamped, painted, or carved relief pictorial images illustrating scenes of legendary rulers, paragons of filial piety and loyalty, historical and mythological stories, and scenes of feasting, homage, processions, and other subjects as patterns of life and afterlife…. More than just supplying the needs of the dead, the tomb layout, pictorial images, and burial artefacts can all be seen functioning as exemplary models picturing or embodying the universe of the living and the dead.”
(http://etcweb.princeton.edu/asianart/timeperiod_china.jsp?ctry=China&pd=Qin|Han)

Slide 13:
A silk banner from Mawangdui, Changsha, Hunan province
It was draped over the coffin of Lady Dai (d. 168 BCE), wife of the Marquess Li Cang (利蒬) (d. 186 BCE), chancellor for the Kingdom of Changsha.

Slide 14:
The Han dynasties are also known for their jade burial suits. These were suits composed of small squares or rectangles of jade, sewn together with thread, often gold or silk, in which royal family members and wealthy aristocrats were buried. For many years, it was thought that the jade burial suits were a myth, but in the past century, several have been discovered in tombs around China.
Left: An example of a silk thread-linked jade burial suit on display at the Museum of the Western Han dynasty Mausoleum of the Nanyue King, Guangzhou
Right: This burial suit from the Eastern Han dynasty is held together with silver thread.

Slide 15:
Jade carving was already extremely sophisticated by the time of the first (Western) Han dynasty. Han artisans used and refined existing techniques to create extremely ornate pieces of art, as well as accessory items for everyday use (by elites, not commoners), such as jewelry and buckles.

Slide 17:
Slide 18:
These are Chinese Western Han (202 BCE–9 CE) era lacquerwares and lacquer tray unearthed from the 2nd-century-BC Han Tomb No.1 at Mawangdui, Changsha, China in 1972. Overall Height: 5cm; Length: 78cm; Width: 48cm.  

Slide 19:

Architecture

Building Materials
Timber was the chief building material in Han architecture. It was used for grand palace halls, multi-story towers, multi-story residential halls, and humble abodes. However, due to the rapid decay over time of wood and its susceptibility to fire, the oldest wooden buildings found in China – i.e., several temple halls of Mount Wutai – date no earlier than the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE).

What remains of Han-dynasty architecture are ruins of brick and rammed earth walls, including above-ground city walls and underground tomb walls, rammed earth platforms for terraced altars and halls, funerary stone or brick pillar-gates, such as the one below, and scattered ceramic roof tiles that once adorned timber halls. Sections of the Han-era rammed earth Great Wall still exist in Gansu province, along with the Han frontier ruins of thirty beacon towers and two fortified castles with crenellations. Han walls of frontier towns and forts in Inner Mongolia were typically constructed with stamped clay bricks instead of rammed earth. Thatched or tiled roofs were supported by wooden pillars, because the addition of brick, rammed earth, or mud walls of these halls did not actually support the roof. Stone and plaster were also used for domestic architecture. Tiled eaves projecting outward were built to distance falling rainwater from the walls; they were supported by brackets that were sometimes elaborately decorated. Molded designs usually decorated the ends of roof tiles, as seen in artistic models of buildings and in surviving tile pieces.

Slide 20:
The Gaoyi Que, a stone-carved pillar-gate (que)
A stone-carved pillar-gate, or que (闕), 6 m (20 ft) in total height, located at the tomb of Gao Yi in Ya’an, Sichuan province, Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 CE)

Notice the stone-carved decorations of roof tile eaves, despite the fact that Han dynasty stone que – part of the walled structures around tomb entrances lacked wooden or ceramic components but often imitated wooden buildings with ceramic roof tiles. Wikipedia.org http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Gao_Yi_ Que2.jpg

Slide 21:
Left and right: Han dynasty pottery palace, created for elite burial, excavated from tomb. c. 2nd century BCE
Henan Provincial Museum, Zhengzhou, China.

**Architecture of Tombs**
Valuable clues about Han architecture can be found in Han artwork of ceramic models, paintings, and carved or stamped bricks discovered in tombs and other sites. The layout of Han tombs were also built like underground houses, comparable to the scenes of courtyard houses found on tomb bricks and in three-dimensional models. Han homes had a courtyard area (and some had multiple courtyards) with halls that were slightly elevated above it and connected by stairways. Multi-story buildings included the main colonnaded residence halls built around the courtyards as well as watchtowers. The halls were built with intersecting crossbeams and rafters that were usually carved with decorations; stairways and walls were usually plastered over to produce a smooth surface and then painted.

Slide 22:
A Chinese mid-Eastern-Han dynasty (25–220 CE) ceramic architectural model of a fortified multi-story manor house with a covered bridge extended to a smaller watchtower. This model was excavated by archaeologists in 1993 from an Eastern-Han tomb at Jiazuo, Henan Province, China. The main building is 192 cm tall and has a courtyard with gate-towers, an exterior stairway leading from the courtyard to the front balcony of the first level, and four sets of rooftops.

This information is taken from:
This artifact is now located in the Henan Provincial Museum, Zhengzhou, China; from collection posted at www.GaryLeeTodd.com by Dr. Gary L. Todd, Professor of History, Sias International University, Xinzheng, China.

**Tower Architecture**
There are Han-era literary references to tall towers found in the capital cities. They often served as watchtowers, astronomical observatories, and religious establishments meant to attract the favor of immortals. The court eunuchs Zhao Zhong and Zhang Rang discouraged the aloof Emperor Ling of Han (r. 168–189 CE) from ascending to the top floors of tall towers, claiming it would cause bad luck, in order to conceal from him the enormous palatial mansions the eunuchs built for themselves in Luoyang. It is not known for certain whether or not miniature ceramic models of residential towers and watchtowers found in Han-dynasty tombs are completely faithful representations of such timber towers, yet they reveal vital clues about lost timber architecture. There are only a handful of existing ceramic models of multi-story towers from pre-Han and Western Han eras. The bulk of the hundreds of towers found so far were made during the Eastern Han period. Model towers could be fired as one piece in the kiln or assembled from several different ceramic pieces to create the whole. No one tower is a duplicate of the other, yet they share common features. They often had a walled
courtyard at the bottom, a balcony with balustrades, windows for every floor, and roof tiles capping and concealing the ceiling rafters. There were also human figures peering out the windows or standing on the balconies, door knockers, and pets such as dogs in the bottom courtyard. Perhaps the most direct pieces of evidence to suggest that miniature ceramic tower models are faithful representations of real-life Han timber towers are tile patterns. Artistic patterns found on the circular tiles that cap the eave-ends on the miniature models are exact matches of patterns found on real-life Han roof tiles excavated at sites such as the royal palaces in Chang’an and Luoyang.